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[See p. 34

"POSTAL DELAYS"

PARTNERS

BY
MARGARET DELAND

ILLUSTRATED BY
CHARLES DANA GIBSON



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ILLUSTRATIONS

"POSTAL DELAYS"	<i>Frontispiece</i>
MRS. GEDGE WAS READY TO SAY ANYTHING, IF ONLY SHE COULD CHEER 'MANDY UP A LITTLE	<i>Facing p. 24</i>
THE ADMIRATION OF THE ALBUM	" 48
"I LIKE YOU, 'MANDY"	" 112

PARTNERS

PARTNERS

CHAPTER I

THE post-office in Purham was at the foot of a long hill, around which curved, like a bending arm, a little rushing brown brook. Main Street climbed this hill a little way, then paused at a watering-trough—a hollowed log, mossy and dripping and bordered with wet ferns; after that the street melted into a country road which wandered through the fields, ending as a neighborhood lane for the convenience of half a dozen houses which were only occupied during that part of the year in which the “summer people,” as they were called, invaded the Purham quiet. The houses along Main Street stood close together in a

PARTNERS

friendly way, turning their backs—whenever they could—on the pretentious residences above them. Purham acknowledged that the people who lived in the hill cottages—*cottages*, if you please! into whose front parlors you could almost put a whole Purham house;—had a certain value; but it looked down upon them as one does look down upon the merely useful. Purham admitted that they were useful; they meant trade, and trade meant money in the bank. They also meant fuss and foolery and idleness—which would have been a bad example for youth had there been any youth in Purham. But as Purham boys and girls grew up they hurried away into the world,—and the bad example could not hurt Purham's old age and childhood; as for its caretaking middle age, that was protected by its own slow contempt, softened by amusement, for the whole bil'in' of them hill folks.

PARTNERS

The village was small; forty houses, perhaps, besides the Post-office and the tavern, which last was frequented by drummers with sample-trunks, and itinerant dentists, or an occasional photographer who offered to make a crayon portrait of any of your deceased relatives, provided you could give him a tintype and ten dollars. Purham houses were all made on one pattern, inside and out: a story and a half high, with a room on each side of a narrow entry, which was generally so dark that one could not see the pattern of the oil-cloth. But that was an advantage if the oil-cloth was shabby. Each house had a shed at right angles to the kitchen. All the best rooms had the same cold, musty smell—perhaps because the windows were not often opened, owing to a tendency to stick which sometimes kept them shut from one spring-cleaning to another.

Except at a meeting of the sewing-

PARTNERS

society or at a funeral, Purham parlors never saw the light, although they held the choicest possessions of the household. The crayon portraits hung upon their walls, and the framed funeral wreaths; braided rugs protected their carpets from infrequent feet or the rare intrusion of sunshine. The center-tables in these melancholy rooms held the family Bible, and, standing on a wool mat, an astral lamp which awaited an occasion important enough to be lighted; an occasion so long in coming that often the oil was thick and yellow in the red or green glass bowl.

There was, however, one house on Main Street—a little gray house fronting the elm-shaded common—which was not on the Purham lines. Old Mrs. Gedge lived in this house with her daughter Amanda; and though they followed the village standards as well as they could in other things, they were conspicuous—and important—because they had no

PARTNERS

parlor. But as if to make up for this deficiency, their house had two front doors. One opening into the entry, for family use; the other into the room that should have been the parlor. From a pole above this second door blew out bravely an American flag, beneath which was nailed a weatherbeaten sign:

“U. S. Post-Office”

In that room—which had once been as good a parlor as anybody else’s!—there was no bowing to Purham custom; no center table or astral lamp, no crayon portraits—nothing but business!

It was divided by a partition in which were rows of pigeonholes. There was a counter on one side, and a show-case. Some shelves between the front windows held immemorial green pasteboard boxes, their corners strengthened by strips of linen pasted along each angle; there was writing-paper in these boxes, pale

PARTNERS

pink and yellow, with fine blue ruling, and perhaps a picture at the top of each sheet. In the show-case were bits of jewelry pasted upon yellowing cards, and some scent bottles, and bottles of red and blue ink; standing on its scratched and dim glass top were three jars which held red and white kisses, little hard gumdrops, and fat black sticks of licorice. The only decorations in the room were posters of county fairs and of traveling bell-ringers; one as recent as within two years.

In the open space in front of the partition was a small air-tight stove, melon-shaped and rusty; one chair stood near this stove, but one only. "*I* would have more chairs if it was mine, this post-office," said Mrs. Gedge, "but it is a place for business, not sociality, so the Government don't provide chairs; and it ain't for me to seem to criticize by bringing in more than one of my own."

PARTNERS

Mrs. Gedge and Amanda had lived in Purham all their lives, and in the social life of Main Street had held their unassailable position; but since those pigeonholes had been put into the parlor (twenty years ago now)—since that time the two women, tranquilly aging under the shadow of the flag, had grown vastly more important. They were the custodians of the United States mail; they were intrusted with public moneys; they had communications with Washington; it was reported, although carefully not asserted by either mother or daughter, that they had had a letter from the President! The consciousness of their obligations and responsibilities clothed them as with a uniform. Amanda Gedge carried her tall, spare form with a precision suited to the parade-ground; she held her head, her mother used to tell her, like a soldier—"which is only right," said Mrs. Gedge, "for you are a soldier's daughter, and you are

PARTNERS

in the Government!" Mrs. Gedge had been known to put an end to a political discussion, begun around the stove while she was distributing the mail, on the ground that she was "connected with the administration, and it was not right for her to hear it criticized; so, if they pleased, they could step outside and talk about it." The Secretary of State could have no better excuse for refusing to discuss the President's message!

But that time of arrogance and the sense of power was eight years ago, when Mrs. Gedge, able to sort the letters herself and hand them out of the delivery window, could overhear comments upon the weather, or the church, or, once in four years, the politics of the nation. Now that pleasant time was over; all day long she sat behind the partition, her crutches beside her, her knitting in her crippled old hands, and the sorting of the mail was left to

PARTNERS

the milder and more indulgent Amanda, who never dreamed of telling people what they must or must not talk about. "I tell 'Mandy she's my partner," Mrs. Gedge used to say, jocosely; "since she's grown up I trust the office to her quite considerable." In point of fact, she entrusted it entirely to her faded, gentle daughter, who was a trifle deaf, and so absorbed by her duties that she did not notice the discussions carried on in the open space about the stove, which space, even Mrs. Gedge admitted, belonged to the Public. Besides, although Amanda appreciated her own dignity, her deepest thought was for her mother, and she was not so apt to reflect upon what was due to her official personality as to wonder whether Mrs. Gedge's rheumatism was better, or whether they could afford to try a bottle of some new kind of medicine. Still, Amanda knew her importance as a representative of the United States government.

PARTNERS

It was all pathetically genuine. The summer people, who found the Gedges very slow and provoking, had no idea of the reality behind the little pomposities. Amanda's bosom had thrilled with patriotism, when, twenty-four years before, her father had enlisted; it still thrilled at any mention of her country. Every evening when she let fall the halyards and took the flag in, she did it with a mental salute; every morning when she ran the colors up she held her head high with pride. It was not empty pride; Amanda had made sacrifices for that flag that streamed out gaily in the sunshine or clung to the pole in rain and mist; not only her father, but her lover, William Boyce, had died for it. Twenty-five years ago Amanda had not been angular and dried up; a boy, in those dewy days, had loved her youth and her gentle brown eyes—"eyes like my setter's," the boy had said, knowing no higher comparison.

PARTNERS

When he went away to fight for his country, he took with him her promise to be faithful to him forever—just as his setter would be faithful, too. “Forever” was not a very long time; he came home again in a year, so sick, poor fellow, that he did not care much for the faithfulness that was awaiting him; he hardly noticed Amanda, who nursed him day and night, or Ponto, who lapped his hot hand whenever it fell listlessly at his side. Then he died;—and Amanda, tearless, saluted the flag!

Her father had never come home; she did not even know where his grave was, but Willie’s was over on the hill. It seemed to belong to Amanda, for the young man’s family—and Ponto—moved away from Purham, and left the low green mound to her. More than that, the poem on the slate headstone had been the one literary achievement of Mrs. Gedge’s life—she had com-

PARTNERS

posed it, but it only. Official life, she had been heard to complain, left her no time for writing poetry. She also laid to official life the charge that she was severe in telling people not to talk politics in the post-office. "In my position, you have your responsibilities," said Mrs. Gedge, "and maybe you do get a mite harsh." Yet Mrs. Gedge's harshness was only on the surface; more than once she had illustrated the paternal side of government by small indulgences, such as delaying the mail-bag for a letter which she knew was being written by a slow and anxious correspondent. It was quite an ordinary thing for her to give a postal to a customer who had chanced to leave his purse at home, and when he remembered his penny debt she had been known to refuse to recognize his paltry obligation, although the deficiencies caused by such governmental generosity gave Amanda many arithmetical diffi-

PARTNERS

culties, and lessened their already slender income. Neither Mrs. Gedge nor Amanda really minded that; their inconvenience was *noblesse oblige*; to hold back the wheels of government and to be mulcted of a penny now and then, was the incident of responsibility. Yet such is the ingratitude of human nature that there had been more than one irritated protest heard in the open space before the delivery window. To be sure, such protests had always come from the summer residents, "and," said Mrs. Gedge, comforting her daughter, whose face was flushed and whose eyes glittered with tears, "you really can't expect anything else of such people, Amanda!"

"Well, I must say it was unreasonable," Amanda agreed. "Mr. Hamilton knows that we have to consider the Public, but he says *he's* the Public—and only here six weeks in the summer! I said, said I: 'Mr. Hamilton, Mrs. Dace

PARTNERS

wanted to send off some collars she'd been making for her daughter, and I knew she only had a stitch to put in them. If I'd sent the mail-bag down by the morning stage those collars wouldn't have been in it, and Mary Dace wouldn't have got them in time for Sunday. So I kept back the bag, and coaxed Olly to take it down on the evening stage.' Well, Mr. Hamilton was just as unreasonable!"

"You shouldn't argue with people like that, 'Mandy. The Government is the only thing you've got to consider. If Mr. Hamilton don't like the way the Government serves him—well, let him carry his letters himself!"

"It was nothing but a paper that was delayed, anyhow," Amanda explained for the third time.

Mrs. Gedge pulled her little brown knitted shawl around her shoulders. "Of course we do sell more stamps when they are here—the summer people; but

PARTNERS

they are so fussy and overbearing, even to us, that I don't think they are worth the money they bring in. I declare, I believe they think Purham belongs to them!"

But a sense of importance will sustain one under small irritations, and the peaceful life in the little house shadowed by the blowing flag and the big elms, was not really disturbed. All that summer, which was tremulous with the excitement of a great campaign, Mrs. Gedge sat knitting behind the pigeon-holes, watching the Public come and go along the dusty road, or the stage tugging up from the bridge across the brook, and pausing at the Public's door to leave the mail-bag. The sitting-room, on the other side of the entry was really a pleasanter place than the office, but the old postmistress, although she was willing to say, (as a joke,) that Amanda was her "partner," was not willing to be anything but the head of

PARTNERS

the firm; so day in and day out she sat behind the pigeonholes and permitted her daughter to do all the work. But after the last mail was distributed she was glad to relax into domesticity.

In the sitting-room they were, Mrs. Gedge said, just like anybody else; (probably she never really believed this, but she said it). This room had no flavor of a Purham parlor; it had just plain comfort. The south window was full of Amanda's geraniums, flourishing so finely that the vigorous leaves made the room faintly fragrant. The base-burner was bright with polish and nickel trimmings, and the worn "two-ply" in the center of the pumpkin-yellow floor gave a hint of comfortable color underfoot. On the wall, above a little table draped with a crazy-patchwork cover, was a book-rack holding the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* and one or two such faithful friends; but scarcity of books left more room for the few ornaments

PARTNERS

that Mrs. Gedge loved, and Amanda had revered ever since her childhood: a whale's tooth, a yellowing bunch of wax grapes, and two china vases; on the top shelf was a Rogers group, presented by one of the summer people who had been clearing her "cottage" out, and getting rid of what she called "horrors." But the most precious thing in the sitting-room—at any rate to Amanda—was a chromo of General Grant.

"I remember the night father brought that picture home," Amanda used to say; "you didn't see it till supper-time; you were up-stairs." Amanda's brown eyes grew vague with faithful memory. "It was the night before father went away," she said.

"Yes," Mrs. Gedge assented; "I was up-stairs sitting on the cowhide trunk, crying. That's why I was late for supper. You know I wanted your father to take his things in your grandfather Beed's cowhide trunk, and he said he

PARTNERS

couldn't take a trunk to the war. He said it wasn't customary. My, how I cried when he said that! It seemed so poor not to have a trunk, and I didn't give up asking him to take it until the last minute. He said, said he, 'it would be fine to have a trunk, in a fight; I could stop the whole shootin' match, while I unpacked it, and got out a handkerchief if I was het up.'—Your father always would have his joke! But it wa'n't no joke to me, seeing him go without a trunk! You were too young—only eighteen—to feel it as I did. You didn't cry."

"No, I didn't cry in those days," Amanda said, meekly. "I didn't seem to have time to cry. I just followed father round and round, and I watched him hang General Grant. But you were always a pretty crier, mother."

"Willie Boyce was in that evening," Mrs. Gedge went on. "I can see him to this day! He wanted you to see

PARTNERS

his uniform. He wasn't pretty, Willie wasn't, but that never seemed to make any difference to you. Poor Willie! Well, he had a handsome casket; I never knew where his folks got the money to pay for it; but it must have been a comfort to him if he was aware of it. Many's the time I've wondered whether he knows that I wrote the poem on his tombstone? But the Bible don't say whether folks is aware or not."

The mention of Willie Boyce turned Amanda silent. She said she must go into the office for a minute, and left her mother wondering why the child never would talk about her beau. "It's all right to be faithful forever," Mrs. Gedge reflected, "but you needn't grieve forever. T'ain't sense."

CHAPTER II

BY October of that year even Purham had stirred in its satisfied indifference, and was hearing the voice of the nation instructing and suggesting and contradicting itself. The voting population listened with stolid amusement to the men who came to tell them that their party had outlived its usefulness, and to entreat them to "save the country." In all these years Purham had never been so near holding political opinions. It was really very interesting. Even Mrs. Gedge said that if they were true—the things that were said about the party in power—she hoped they would be turned out; but she regretted this indiscretion afterward.

PARTNERS

"It isn't for us to express an opinion, child," she told Amanda; "though, of course, they are all anxious to know what we think."

Amanda made some vague reply. She was less interested than usual in her own importance. These fall days brought the anniversary of Willie Boyce's death, and her mind kept wandering to that mound over on the hillside. She remembered, with pitiful love, his weary indifference to her in the weeks that he lay dying. "Willie was sick," she said to herself; "he didn't even notice Ponto licking his hand—poor old Ponto! How he grieved for Willie." Neither she nor Ponto had been hurt at Willie's indifference; the two faithful souls had only loved the boy the more, because of the suffering that had blotted out his love for them. But no doubt in these still October days her thought of Willie made her more abstracted, and so less careful than usual about the letters;

PARTNERS

at the mid-day distribution she dropped one on the floor, and did not notice it until evening. Then she put a shawl over her head and ran across to Mr. Goodrich's with it.

"It's lucky it wasn't for that Hamilton man," Mrs. Gedge said, with a contemptuous chuckle; "he'd have made a fuss about it; I believe he thinks he owns the place!"

As for Silas Goodrich, anything so important as the arrival of a letter made the delay of an hour or a day a very small matter; it had come, and that was all he cared about! He never dreamed of finding fault.

The next day was the anniversary of Willie's death, and in the afternoon Amanda went up to the graveyard with a wreath of immortelles, which she had dyed pink and blue and vivid green. She propped it against the slate headstone, then knelt down and with her handkerchief wiped the piece of glass

PARTNERS

which so many years ago, had been set into the slate to cover a tintype of a consumptive young man in a soldier's uniform. Amanda looked at the picture long and wistfully. Some day, when she had saved the money, she was going to have a crayon copy made of this tintype. Ten dollars is not a large sum to save; indeed, it had several times been reached, but just as the last dollar or dime was added to the fund there was always some call for it. Her mother needed a wheeled chair, or a new cooking-stove must be bought, or the re-shingling of the roof was absolutely necessary; so the sitting-room was still without a crayon.

Amanda picked away some dead myrtle leaves and scraped a flake of lichen from the stone. She knew the inscription by heart, but she always read it over with unfailing pride for her mother as well as tenderness for Willie.

PARTNERS

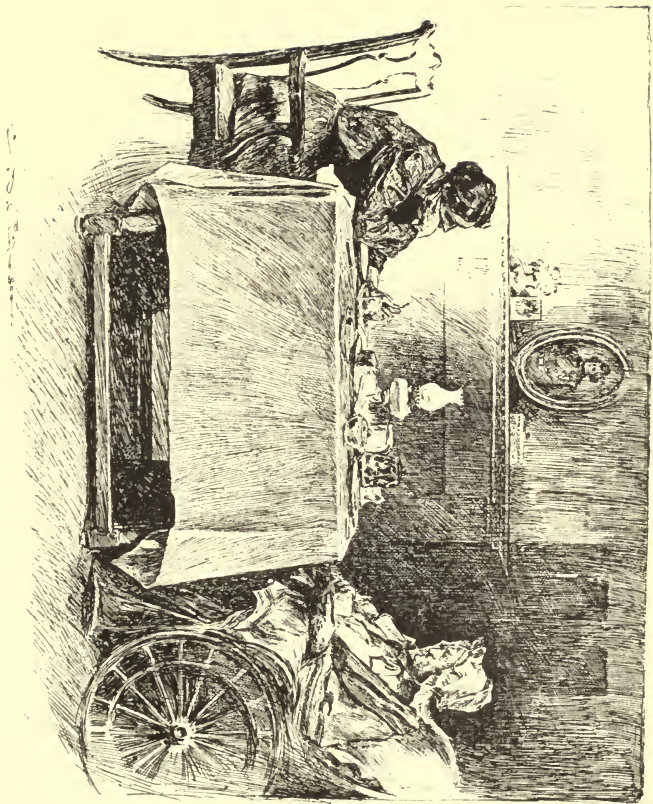
“William P. Boyce,” it ran, “died for his country;” then the date, followed by the verse which Mrs. Gedge had composed:

Oh, traveler, whoever you may be,
Take warning and advice by he
Who lies beneath this tomb.
He went to war and died,
And now in paradise is glorified.
Mourned by his friends.

“Mourned by his friends,” Amanda repeated; “yes, you’ll always be mourned, Willie.” Then she stooped and kissed his name.

She was very silent that evening, and her mother was full of small devices to cheer her. She told her how Mr. Hamilton’s John had come down to see whether a letter he expected in the noon mail might not have been overlooked.

“He said that Mr. Hamilton expected it yesterday. I said, said I, ‘No, of course it hadn’t been overlooked.’ Such a time about a letter! Well, he’s gone,



MRS. GEDGE WAS READY TO SAY ANYTHING, IF ONLY SHE COULD CHEER 'MANDY UP A LITTLE

PARTNERS

anyway, Mr. Hamilton has. I wonder," she ended, satirically, "that he didn't stay over until to-morrow to get his letter."

Mrs. Gedge was ready to say anything if only she could cheer 'Mandy up a little. ("My goodness, and her beau dead twenty-five years!" she thought to herself.)

"Yes," she proceeded, "'pears he got a telegram; I saw him driving off afterward like a crazy man. Those summer people have no sort of consideration for their beasts; he made his horses fly!"

Amanda looked uneasy. "I don't think I could have missed his letter, but I guess I'll just run in and give a look into the bag. Don't you remember that time Mrs. Ainn's letter stuck in the bag?"

She took a lamp, shielding its clear flame with her hand as she walked across the drafty entry into the office. The mail-bag, lean and empty, hung between

PARTNERS

two chairs, awaiting the morning letters. Amanda put her hand into it and felt all around. "Of course there's no letter," she said to herself, indignantly. "It's just as mother says, they do fuss so!" She stopped to see that the fire was quite out in the stove, then, with sudden boldness, opened one of the candy jars and abstracted two gumdrops. "There! I guess mother and me can have some; they're getting stale."

Afterwards, looking back upon it, that evening seemed to Amanda Gedge wonderfully pleasant. The end of almost any phase of human experience seems pleasant when one looks back upon it. Amanda set the table, and made the toast, and got out a tumbler of currant jelly as a treat. When the dishes were washed they sat down by the stove, and while Amanda mended her stockings, Mrs. Gedge talked. These two quiet women found life very interesting. First, of course, their own responsi-

PARTNERS

bilities suggested conversation. Then they had all their past to talk about; it had had its sorrows—little Charles, Amanda's twin, who died when he was ten years old; Mr. Gedge, who, making his joke, went to the war without a trunk, and whose grave, somewhere in the South, was marked "Unknown"; Willie Boyce—though it was only Mrs. Gedge who talked of Willie. They could speak, too, of their happiness in not being obliged to draw a pension. "Government gave us our position, so we are independent," said Amanda. Mrs. Gedge acquiesced, adding that a pension would make her feel like a beggar, anyway, but not needing it, being in the Government, it would make her feel like a thief! Then they could talk of the geraniums; their looks as compared to last year, or the year before, or many years before; or the frost; or how long the tub of butter was going to last. Yes, life was very interesting.

PARTNERS

The next morning it rained, and was too damp for Mrs. Gedge to leave the sitting-room stove, so she settled herself by the window for a long day's knitting. The stage came swinging and creaking down the hill, and stood in front of the post-office waiting for the mail-bag, the four horses steaming in the rain. Mrs. Gedge saw the young, red-faced driver knock on the off-wheel with the handle of his whip, and heard him call out: "Morning, 'Mandy!" But Amanda did not appear. "My! she ain't fast," the old postmistress said, impatiently. But the next minute her daughter hurried out with the still lean bag in her arms, and Olly Clough thrust it under his feet on the toeboard. Then he flourished his whip and went jolting slowly down to the bridge to disappear behind the hill. Mrs. Gedge could not imagine why Amanda should stand there bareheaded looking after him, apparently forgetful of the rain. She scratched upon the

PARTNERS

window-pane with her knitting-needles to attract her daughter's attention, but Amanda did not seem to hear her; she turned slowly and went back into the office. It was ten minutes later before she came into the sitting-room.

"What made you so slow, child?" demanded Mrs. Gedge. Mrs. Gedge kept young by means of an unflagging curiosity about small happenings.

"Mother," said Amanda, "look at *that!*" She held up a letter as she spoke.

Mrs. Gedge stretched out her hand for it eagerly, and holding it at arm's-length, read the address: "'Arthur Hamilton, Esq., Purham, Vermont.' Well, child—but how did it come this time of day? Oh, it was in the bag yesterday, after all?"

Amanda was quite pale; she pushed back a lock of hair from her high, bleak forehead. "That's the letter he was inquiring after!—and it's back-stamped day before yesterday, so he'll know

PARTNERS

when it came. It got shoved into one of the low call boxes. My *goodness!*" This burst of excitement really alarmed Mrs. Gedge. "Why, child, you needn't be so put out. He ain't in town. Didn't I tell you he went away yesterday? I don't know as I'd put it into his box, anyhow. If he gets it he'll know it was delayed, and then he'll fuss. I don't believe I'd give it to him, 'Mandy."

"Oh, mother, I don't hardly think that would do," Amanda said, shocked.

"Well, perhaps it wouldn't," Mrs. Gedge admitted, reluctantly. "Course, I wouldn't think of such a thing if it was anybody else. But that man! He's gone now, anyhow, and probably he's found out what was in the letter by this time, so he hasn't any need of it; and you know he's had no experience in a post-office; he don't understand how a mistake could be made.—Well, I don't see myself, 'Mandy, how could you get that letter into the wrong hole!" Mrs.

PARTNERS

Gedge frowned a little. "Tch!" she said. It was all very well to call Amanda her "partner," just in fun—but really! However, there was no use scolding the girl. "There, it isn't any matter, child; put it with his night mail."

"No; I must take it up to his house now," said Amanda. "I'll have to bundle you up and wheel you into the office. It 'll take me an hour to go and come, and the office can't be closed all that time."

Mrs. Gedge did not half like it, she said; it was not right for the post-office to wait on Mr. Hamilton by carrying him his letters; it was trouble enough to sort them out! Nevertheless she permitted Amanda to take her across the hall and place her on the official side of the pigeonholes within reach of the stamp-drawer and the letter-scales. If anybody wanted gum-drops or writing-paper they would have to help themselves, and bring her the change.

PARTNERS

When Amanda started up the hill with Mr. Hamilton's letter, her large freckled face was pale, and her anxious eyes looked out from under a forehead that was creased with worry. She was so preoccupied that she forgot to raise her umbrella—which did not matter much because the rain could not greatly increase the shabbiness of her hat.

It had rained since before dawn, and the sycamores and lindens had given up the few yellow leaves to which they had clung since the last frost; the ground was covered with them, and the air was heavy with their dank aromatic scent. The wheel ruts were full of running yellow water. Amanda picked her way carefully, but her Congress gaiters were soaked above her overshoes, and even the white stockings on her lean ankles were splashed. She said to herself that she was glad it had not rained yesterday—"tho' I'd have gone up to Willie, anyhow," she said, simply.

PARTNERS

Then she thought of her wreath of immortelles, and hoped the colors wouldn't "run." The glass over the tintype in the headstone must be so spattered by this pouring rain that Willie, in his uniform, could not be seen. She would be glad when she could have the crayon made. She knew just where it was going to hang in the sitting-room—right opposite General Grant; she had a plan about a cross of purple immortelles to place above it. To think thus of Willie began to smooth the worry out of her face.

By the time Mr. Hamilton's house was in sight, she had gone through a calculation as to how long it would take her, putting aside ten cents a week, to save up the three dollars still lacking. Seven months and two weeks! Well, to be on the safe side, say eight months. Amanda smiled, and forgot her apprehensions. At Mr. Hamilton's door, a little out of breath and honestly apologetic, she was no longer worried. "John," she said to

PARTNERS

the man who answered her ring, "this letter was overlooked. I'm real sorry."

"Well, now!" said John, amiably. "When did it come? Yes, sir! it's that Washington letter. Why, Miss Gedge, he was lookin' for it two days ago. They had to telegraph him to come on. Lord! he kicked like a steer about it. 'Postal delays,' says he. Obligated to you for bringin' it, miss."

Amanda did not reply; she was gathering her skirts up under her waterproof again, and shaking open her umbrella.

"You might 'a' saved yourself the trouble of climbing the hill," John ruminated; "he's fetched up in Washington by this time; so the letter ain't needed, as you might say."

Amanda nodded, and went plodding down the driveway, her tall body leaning against the wind that twisted the old rubber waterproof around her ankles and beat her umbrella over side-wise;

PARTNERS

the barege veil hung wet and straight across one shoulder. The cold misgiving had come back: "Postal delays;" and Mr. Hamilton was in Washington! Suppose he should find fault?—suppose the Government should hear about the "delay"? Of course their long and friendly relations with the Post-office would make an explanation simple enough; yet it was not pleasant to think that Mr. Hamilton might speak of them unkindly to some one in the Department. She wished the President could know what good Republicans they were. She thought uneasily of that remark of her mother's about "turning the party out"; it wasn't wise for people in office to say a thing like that. It might be repeated. And dear knows, she and her mother were loyal! She had never begrudged her father and Willie Boyce to her country; she wished, if Mr. Hamilton did say anything about the Purham post-office, he would speak of the two

PARTNERS

soldiers. But of course he wouldn't. Perhaps he didn't even know of them.

The wind suddenly twisted her umbrella, and her face was wet with rain.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Amanda had put on dry clothing she hurried into the office, for there was much to do before the arrival of the noon stage. What with her work, and listening to Mrs. Gedge's minute account of all that had transpired in her absence, she had no time before the mail came to tell her mother of her anxieties. She listened with close attention to every word of the small happenings: Sally Goodrich had come in for two stamps, and her five-cent piece had rolled down in that crack by the stove; but Mrs. Gedge had said, "Never mind, Sally, you can have them just as well"; for it was raining, as Amanda knew, and Sally Goodrich at her age—she was sixty-one, if she was a day—

PARTNERS

could not go back in the rain just for four cents; besides, the money was really in the post-office, and if the floor should ever be raised they would get it. Mrs. Gedge, having been silent for an hour, talked in a steady, cheerful stream, broken only by Amanda's little interjections of surprise and interest.

But after dinner, which the noon mail made as late as one o'clock, Amanda could not help saying that she wished that letter had belonged to anybody on earth but Mr. Hamilton!

"Oh, you take it too much to heart, child," Mrs. Gedge reassured her. "Why, 'Mandy, he's only a summer person; he's gone away now, and we won't see or hear of him till next summer. I don't know why he stayed so late this year, anyhow!"

"Well, maybe we wont," said Amanda, doubtfully; "but John seemed to think he was dreadfully put out about

PARTNERS

it. He said he *kicked*. I suppose he meant he stamped his foot."

"What if he did? It only shows he's a bad-tempered man, that's all!"

"Yes; but — he's in Washington, mother."

Mrs. Gedge did not see the connection for a moment, then suddenly she looked concerned. "Well, now, Amanda, how could you overlook that letter? Dear me, child, I don't see how you did it! Why, if he's in Washington, he might say something. I tell you, I wouldn't like that, 'Mandy!'"

Amanda sighed. "Neither would I. If there was any excuse—but there isn't. It was—it was the fifteenth of October, mother; *you* know? the day before the—sixteenth. And I was sort of dull. Well, I suppose I couldn't write that to Washington?"

"Of course you could!" cried Mrs. Gedge; "and if he *should* say anything, I'd like them to know what a good ex-

PARTNERS

cuse we have." But though she spoke bravely to Amanda, Mrs. Gedge did not, in the bottom of her heart, feel quite easy.

As the afternoon passed, darkening into rainy dusk, she spoke once or twice of the letter they might have to write in case "that Hamilton man" should make trouble for them. Suddenly, just as they were sitting down to supper, her face lightened: "'Mandy! I'll tell you what would be a good thing, better than waiting till the trouble's made, to tell them about Willie: *send a present, now!*"

"To Mr. Hunter?" said Amanda.

Mr. Hunter was the gentleman whose rubber stamp signed the occasional communications from Washington, and to whom they submitted their quarterly accounts.

"I meant the President," said Mrs. Gedge, doubtfully; "but I don't know but what Mr. Hunter would be better. Then, if that man should presume to

PARTNERS

say anything, Mr. Hunter would know that our intentions were all right."

"Oh, mother, I *don't* know," Amanda demurred. "Maybe we'd better not do anything? Maybe he won't complain."

But Mrs. Gedge was positive. "No; a present is friendly, and he's probably a busy man, being in a big post-office; so if he has a present from us, it will be easier for him to keep us in mind as being friendly."

Amanda pondered: "What could you send him?"

"Oh, I've thought of that!" said Mrs. Gedge, triumphantly. "Olly Clough can get his friend in Boston to buy an album—a blue velvet album like Sally Goodrich's, with those steel trimmings and clasps."

Even the hesitating Amanda was stirred by that; then her face fell: "Sally's album cost nine dollars and ninety-five cents!"

Mrs. Gedge was dismayed. "Per-

PARTNERS

haps we needn't get such an expensive one?"

"No; if we get any, it ought to be a handsome one," Amanda said; (of course, the crayon could not be ordered this year—that was settled!) "Well, mother," she said, bravely, "I'll run into the office after supper and see what money we've got to spare."

Mrs. Gedge's fear of Mr. Hamilton vanished; the album would nullify any complaints that a fussy "summer person" might make!

"Why, child," she said, putting down the cup she had just raised to her lips—"why, 'Mandy, suppose I was to write a poem, and send it with the album?"

Ever since Willie Boyce died, Mrs. Gedge had meant to write another poem, but there had been no occasion great enough to inspire her.

"Well, now, that is a good idea," Amanda answered, proudly. "It would

PARTNERS

be real nice to send a poem with the present."

And for the rest of the meal Mrs. Gedge tried to find words that rhymed with Hunter, but they were so scarce, "and not real sensible," she said, that she turned to "album;" but although it rhymed well enough with "dumb" and "come;" she did not see just what words she could get in in front of 'em. Amanda tried to help her, but her heart was not in it; she was listening to the rain and thinking of the tintype under the misty glass.

The next morning the matter was intrusted to Olly Clough. He had a friend in Boston,—“a traveling commission merchant,” Olly called him—who could be relied upon to select just what was wanted. The only stipulation was that the album should be blue. If the commission merchant could find one that had two flags crossed on the clasp, like Sally's, he was to get it, even if it

PARTNERS

cost a quarter more. He was to try, however to find one just as good as Sally's, for maybe a dollar less. Olly was so hopeful that his friend could economize that Mrs. Gedge checked him:

"You don't consider money, Olly, when you're getting a present for a friend."

After that there were many days of expectation, for no one could tell when Olly's friend would be able to fill the order. In Mrs. Gedge's mind the reason for making the present, had faded in the excitement of the present itself. It had been easier, no doubt, to forget the reason, because Mr. Hamilton had not come back to Purham. Indeed, when, flushed with triumph, on the Wednesday following the first Monday in November, John called for the letters, he told Mrs. Gedge that he was closing the Hamilton house for the season; if any more mail came for the family it was to be forwarded to Washington.

PARTNERS

"We'll be there this winter," said John, with an important air, "though of course we won't get to work before the fourth of March."

"My goodness!" said Amanda, to herself, "I'm thankful we're done with that Hamilton man until next summer!" She really breathed more freely, for ever since John's betrayal of his master's temper she had had a scared feeling that, although the season was over and all the summer people scattered, Mr. Hamilton might, for some inconceivable reason, come back to Purham and make a scene. "I'd put him out of the office with my own hands," she thought, "rather than have him worry mother." But now that Mr. Hamilton was to be in Congress, he would not have time to make trouble for Purham people. Amanda did not say so, but she wished they had not ordered the album; it was an unnecessary expense.

It was not until well into December

PARTNERS

that the commission merchant attended to Mrs. Gedge's commission. Then one day, on the noon stage, the album came! Olly handed in the mail-bag at the same time, but no one could think of the mail until the package from Boston had been opened:—there it was! bound in rich, bright blue plush, very soft and deep, and with beautiful oxidized clasps. "It's handsome, I will say!" said Olly, his big head in its fur cap blocking up the delivery window; "my friend ain't one for cheap goods." Everyone who came for his or her mail, was called upon to praise Olly's friend's judgment; the delivery of letters was a secondary consideration. Indeed, Purham displayed its good nature as well as its patience, for neither Mrs. Gedge nor Amanda confided the purpose of the album. It was "a gift," they said; and with that, Purham, admiring and inconvenienced and curious, was forced to be content. It was strange to see

PARTNERS

the official reticence of these two simple women, who, so far as their own lives were concerned, had not a single secret. Their reserve was the most striking indication of their pride of office.

The people who had not received any mail lingered longest, kicking their steaming boots against the stove, and waiting, as though in the hope that a relenting afterthought on the part of the postmistress might create a letter. But when the last loiterer went tramping out into the snow, the mother and daughter gave themselves up to the contemplation of their treasure. They took it into the sitting-room, and placed it with almost reverent care, on the crazy patchwork cover of the table; they touched the plush to see how soft it was, and studied the pattern on the clasps, and counted the pages. It was an exciting, indeed an exhausting afternoon.

Sally Goodrich came in at dusk to have a look at the album, the story of

PARTNERS

which had of course, reached her earlier in the day. She was a little condescending at first, but its magnificence overpowered her, and she confessed that that it was far handsomer than her own. She said that she presumed the person it was for would be real pleased? But the mother or daughter were not flattered into giving information. They were impatient to be alone, that they might compose the letter which was to accompany the gift.

They did not, however, get at it until after tea; when they did, Mrs. Gedge could not easily resign the idea of poetry. But Hunter is not a poetical name. . . .

Mrs. Gedge began:

*"This album, sir, I send to you—
To say your friends are always true;
We hope you'll use it, Mr. Hunter,
And—and——"*

"'Mandy! can't you think of anything that goes with Hunter?"



THE ADMIRATION OF THE ALBUM

PARTNERS

"I cannot," Amanda said, despairingly; "try not putting it at the end."

They turned Mr. Hunter round and round and back and forth, for nearly an hour, before Mrs. Gedge gave up and devoted herself to the sober prose of a letter. It was half past nine when it was finished, and the writer went to bed weary, happy, and appalled at the lateness of the hour. Amanda, before she got to bed herself, tucked the album up in its box under a sheet of tissue-paper, as tenderly as though it were a baby. It lay on the table at Mrs. Gedge's bedside, and when Amanda rose the next morning, she found her mother awake and anxious for a look at it.

"I can't wait till I get dressed," the old postmistress said, her eyes, under the full ruffle of her nightcap, bright with excited pride.

It was hard to part with the beautiful thing, but it had to go on the noon stage, and the letter, full of respectful assur-

PARTNERS

ances of regard, went with it. How the thoughts of the contented donors followed each step of its journey! Mrs. Gedge was concerned about the weather; she said that she hoped the snow wouldn't drift badly on the hill-road; Amanda would remember how Olly's father's stage had upset on the hill-road in the great storm twenty-two years ago. In an accident like that, a package could easily be lost, she said, anxiously. She and Amanda calculated the exact moment that it would reach Washington, and the earliest date when an acknowledgment could be looked for.

By this time—mid-December—Mrs. Gedge had quite forgotten Mr. Hamilton. Her life had too many pleasant and interesting things in it to allow her to think about a bad-tempered man, who was nothing but a summer person anyhow. Amanda's apprehensions had vanished too, and she only remembered them when she thought of the tintype

PARTNERS

in the slate headstone, or noticed the vacant spot opposite General Grant. Then she had a little pang because propitiation had been necessary. Mrs. Gedge would not admit that the album had been propitiatory; it was only a gift to an unknown friend. That the friend's acknowledgment of the gift seemed long in coming was a little disappointing although it was easily explained: he might be away from home, or perhaps there was sickness in his family. But the acknowledgment certainly was long in coming, for the first of January found Mr. Hunter's manners still at fault.

Yet although the post-office had forgotten Mr. Hamilton, Mr. Hamilton remembered the post-office!

"I tell you, Philip," he said, one evening, as he and a friend sat over their wine after dinner—"I tell you, the Post-office Department of this country needs a tremendous shaking-up. Yes,

PARTNERS

sir; heads have got to fall. I have a summer house in that little place, Purham—you know? up in the hills. For all practical purposes there is no post-office there; outrageous carelessness and endless inconvenience. But I intend to do my part to secure a proper postal service to my native land."

"At least during the summer?" commented the other man.

"There's a good fellow, a good hustling fellow, that I mean to have put there," Mr. Hamilton went on. "William Sprague—you remember? He was my substitute; he has a ball in his leg now that belongs to me. I'm going to have that job given to him. I've always meant to do something for him."

"Ah, how I respect a philanthropist!" said his friend; "and how just it is that, because he was your substitute in the war, the nation should reward him!"

His host, laughing, knocked his cigar ashes off against his wineglass. "Shore,

PARTNERS

we've been out in the cold for twenty-four years, and we don't propose to keep away from the fire to split the straws of ethics. You may consider that statement official."

"Is that the excuse you will give to the present incumbent when you tip him or her out?"

"Look here, my young reformer," protested the other man, "I advise you to take off your kid gloves. These ideas of yours are too damned fine for our humble capital. Yes, sir; they will do for your part of the world, and I am sure we are grateful that the chaste bosom of the mugwump should have thrilled for us because of our highly moral principles; but, my dear fellow, *now* we have come down to business. We are a great deal more honest than the people you helped us put out, there is no doubt of that; but we are human. This may surprise you as you reflect upon our virtues, but we admit it—

PARTNERS

human. And how shall we dispose of the present incumbents in Purham?" He rose, with a laugh, straightening his shoulders, and lifting his handsome head. "No excuse but the truth is necessary. They are hopelessly inefficient; a couple of old maids, who hold back the mailbags, lose a man's letters, or deliver them a week after they've arrived." He laughed, and struck the younger man good-naturedly on the shoulder. "See here, my boy, don't, by the fineness of your theories, make yourself unfit for practical life. Be as good as you can, but, for the sake of your theories, don't be too good. Doesn't the Bible say somewhere, don't be righteous overmuch? A printed notice of that ought to be sent around to the mugwumps!"

CHAPTER IV

“IT does seem,” Mrs. Gedge said, when, toward the end of January, no acknowledgment had come from Mr. Hunter—“it does seem as though something had happened to that album.”

“Well, mother, Olly saw it safe into the express office; it must have got to Washington, anyhow.”

“You don’t suppose,” Mrs. Gedge queried, in a troubled voice—“you don’t think Mr. Hunter could have thought it was out of the way, us sending him a present? ’Course we’re strangers to him.”

“My, mother! of course he couldn’t,” Amanda assured her. “It’s just as you said last week—sickness in his family or something like that, has put

PARTNERS

it out of his mind. We'll hear soon. Now, don't you worry; it was a nice gift, and will look pretty on his center-table." They had followed the album so closely with their fancy that they knew quite well how it would look. Mrs. Gedge had even said that she hoped his wife was not a foolish young thing, who would put other books on top of it and crush the plush.

Poor Amanda began to dread the coming of the mail-bag, for each day there was always the same hesitating question: "Didn't any letter come this noon, I suppose? I somehow didn't look for one to-day."

"No, mother, not to-day;" then an excuse: "He would have had to write on Monday to reach us by this mail, and Monday's a real inconvenient day;" or, "It's the end of the month; very likely he's real driven with his accounts."

They had written to the express office, and learned that the package had been

PARTNERS

delivered to Mr. Hunter's office, so they could not have even the comfort of thinking that it was lost. Day by day Mrs. Gedge's assurance that she was sure everything was all right, and that she knew, in her position, "how hard it was for some folks to write letters"—day by day such assurances grew more forced in their cheerfulness. When the first of February passed, and the usual official communication from Washington failed to bring with it any personal communication, Mrs. Gedge almost cried and Amanda said to herself that she just couldn't stand it! Her high forehead gathered new wrinkles in those bleak winter days, and anxiety gnawed at her heart, for it was quite evident that the suspense was wearing upon her mother.

One afternoon, coming home from sewing - society, she stopped on the bridge to watch the water racing down the wide shallow bed of the brook, leap-

PARTNERS

ing tumultuously over the larger stones, and sending a faint continuous jar through the hand-rail on which she leaned. The ice, curving in and out along the shore in clear and snowy lines, was like an onyx band; the twigs of a leaning maple, dipping into the water, were fringed with icicles, that jangled as they rose and fell on the current. It was late, and the cold dusk, pricked by some uncertain, hesitating pellets of snow, seemed to Amanda to increase the ache below her breast-bone. She watched a flake touch the stream for a white moment, then fade into its hurrying blackness. Amanda did not consciously moralize, but the futile flakes suggested her own inarticulate pain. She, too, was helpless in the stream; there was nothing she could do. Nothing—nothing! “Oh, that old album! I’d like to burn it!” she said, passionately. Suddenly it occurred to her that she might tell her mother that probably

PARTNERS

Mr. Hunter was dead. If he was dead he was not neglectful, so her mother's feelings need not be hurt. Amanda, in the gathering darkness, wiping away a meager tear, would have seen Mr. Hunter and all his family, dead and buried, if their demise would make her mother happier!

She did not propose Mr. Hunter's death as a solution of the puzzle, until the next morning; then Mrs. Gedge's concern about the Sixth Auditor of the Treasury was almost as alarming as her previous suspense, and Amanda had a desperate feeling of not knowing in which direction to turn next.

The wind was high and cold that day, although the sun shone; but Mrs. Gedge was so disturbed about Mr. Hunter, she said she believed she wouldn't get up; she said the glare of the sun on the snow hurt her eyes, and she'd rather lie in bed.

Amanda's heavy heart grew still heavier. "She's failing!" she said to

PARTNERS

herself. "I guess he's well, mother," she declared; "It was real foolish for me to think he wasn't. Why, they'd have sent *us* word if anything had happened to him.

"Well, then, why don't we hear from him?"

"I guess we will, real soon," poor Amanda tried to sooth her.

"You don't think anybody thinks anything, do you, 'Mandy? You never let on to anybody —Sally Goodrich or anybody—that the album was for Mr. Hunter, and he hasn't written to us?"

"No, mother; no, indeed! There isn't a person that guesses. Nobody but Olly saw the address, and he don't know who Mr. Hunter is; he don't know but what he's a relation."

There were no demonstrations of affection between these two; it would not have occurred to Amanda to kiss her mother, but she took her little blue check shawl from about her own shoul-

PARTNERS

ders and laid it across Mrs. Gedge's feet. "I'll be back from the office as soon as ever I can," she said. She hurried so in sorting the mail that she was not so much as usual on the lookout for a Washington letter—when suddenly she found it in her hand! Her heart seemed to stop with the shock of joy—it had come! Her mother would feel better! "Oh, she 'll get up for dinner!" Amanda said, with a gasp of happiness.

The outer door of the office banged open, and Olly entered again. "Here's a bundle for you, 'Mandy," he said; "I clean forgot to leave it when I hove in the bag."

She raised the delivery window and took the package, which was addressed to her mother; she was putting the mail into the call-boxes, all the while holding the precious letter tightly in one hand, so she pushed the bundle aside. "It's some blanks, I guess," she thought. It seemed to Amanda that Sally Good-

PARTNERS

rich was never so slow in getting her purse out of the pocket of her petticoat to pay for a sheet of writing-paper; nor was Mr. Thyme, who kept the tavern, ever so insistent that there ought to be some inquiries about summer board, and he didn't see why there weren't no letters for him.

In spite of these delays, Amanda was smiling with happiness when it struck her that the package was a present from Mr. Hunter!—she could hardly wait for Mr. Thyme to close the post-office door, before she seized the bundle and the letter, and ran into her mother's room. "It's come!" she said; "he's written! And he's sent us something—look! a present!" The rush of forgiveness made her voice break, but Mrs. Gedge was wonderfully calm. The old sense of her importance gave her at least the appearance of treating Mr. Hunter's courtesy as a matter of course.

"I hope he didn't feel under any

PARTNERS

obligation to give us a present, kind as it is in him. Open the letter first, and see what he says. Hurry, child!"

Amanda's fingers blundered with the envelope; she began to read the letter breathlessly—paused; looked at her mother, blankly; then read on:

"Mr. Hunter desires to acknowledge the receipt of a package from Mrs. Gedge, for which he begs to express his thanks. He regrets that he must herewith return the package, his position precluding the acceptance of gifts."

Mrs. Gedge leaned back on her pillows, fright and bewilderment in her face.

"Mandy, it's our album," she said.

"Oh, 'Mandy!" Her cheeks seemed to hollow in, and her chin shook. "It's our album," she whispered.

Amanda Gedge stood panting, the letter in her shaking hand. "Why, mother! wait! I don't believe it's the album; wait till I look!" But when she had looked, alas, there was no more

PARTNERS

uncertainty, and she turned to the letter again. "Mother, don't cry! There's some mistake—" (Amanda was crying herself.) "I think he's friendly; let me read it again. Listen, mother: he begs to express his thanks—*begs*, mother. Oh, I'm sure he's friendly. He regrets—that means he is very sorry; regret means being sorry. It is his position, the letter says, that makes him return it. And—and he tells the person who wrote the letter for him, to send his thanks. You see, he's so busy he can't even write himself."

But the shock was too great for Mrs. Gedge to be able to see any "friendliness" in the letter written by "another person." She dropped her worn old face on the pillow and whimpered. "Take it away," she said, feebly; and Amanda carried the album into the kitchen. She was so excited and frightened, so angry that her mother's gift had been scorned, that she touched the

PARTNERS

only note of passion that had ever come into her life. She flung the rejected present on the table, and struck it with her clenched fist, saying, under her breath, a single word. The word was only "*You!*" but as far as the spirit went, Amanda broke the Third Commandment.

It was several days before Mrs. Gedge could consider the letter reasonably, but little by little she began to echo, at first rather feebly, Amanda's assurance that Mr. Hunter was "friendly." Then she became quite positive: "Of course it's his position," she said; "I ought to have thought of that, in the first place! I guess he hated to send it back, but he just had to."

Meantime March was blown into April; it had been a hard month for Mrs. Gedge, what with the agitation about the album and the changes in the temperature. But the old postmistress was not the only person who found the

PARTNERS

season trying. William Sprague said to Mr. Hamilton, who stopped to see him one day at his news-stand in Boston—he told Mr. Hamilton that he felt that old wound in his leg in such changeable weather; why, he believed that he could foretell a storm as much as three days before it came; he said he didn't know but what he'd offer his services to the Weather Bureau in Washington! Mr. Hamilton laughed in his easy way, and said he shouldn't wonder if William would be the better for a change of air. "But the Washington climate is bad for game legs, Sprague; what do you say to Vermont?" Then he said a dozen words that left his hearer aghast with pleasure.

"And I'm to be ready the last of May, sir?" William said, eagerly, when Mr. Hamilton's beneficent scheme had been fully explained to him. "All right, sir, all right! I'll be on hand. There's not much for me to do in the way of shutting up shop. I'll just sell out and

PARTNERS

pack up my duds. I haven't any furniture now my poor wife's dead and gone. I auctioned it off."

William Sprague's honest face was red with excitement. He was a short, stout man, with kindly, twinkling blue eyes and a grizzled, red beard. He wore a G. A. R. badge, and walked with a limp; he was stiff with rheumatism, but was never too crippled or too hurried to stop to do a kindness—pick up a fallen child and comfort it with a penny, or walk an extra mile to do a favor for a friend. Yet people were apt to say he was contrary, and cite as an instance his long feud with McCormick, his rival on the next block—a warfare waged with the greatest bitterness on Sprague's side, and furnishing much pleasant interest to those not concerned in it.

"William was like to kill him, till McCormick got the fever," Sprague's friends said, "and then, darn him! he

PARTNERS

up and nursed him for six weeks. Wasn't that the contrariest thing ye ever heard of?"

The fact was William Sprague liked to do a kindness; but it was a question whether he could do a kindness if it were expected of him. "I won't be drov'," said William; and he never was.

"I'll feel bad to leave some of my old comrades," he told Mr. Hamilton; "but I'm obliged to you, sir, I'm obliged to you. There's nothing I'd like better than to run a post-office. You can count on my vote when you're runnin' for President. I bet we'll see you in the White House yet! Take a paper, Mr. Hamilton; take a *Herald*." He folded a paper and thrust it into the hand of his patron. "No, sir! not a cent! I guess I can give you a paper; and a good Democratic organ, too!"

He laughed, and so did Mr. Hamilton.

"Much obliged, Sprague. Well, good

PARTNERS

morning! I shall expect to see you settled when I get up to my country place in July." Then he stooped and patted Jimmy, William's rusty little Scotch terrier, and went away.

William Sprague was, as Mr. Hamilton said, a capable, efficient man. He went to work to wind up the affairs of his news-stand with business-like promptitude. He drove a sharp bargain with the man who bought him out, and cleared ten dollars by the sale of odds and ends about his small premises.

"I'd meant to pitch 'em into the ash bar'l," he confided to one of his cronies, "but of course I didn't tell him so; he saw me packin' 'em up, and that made him hot for 'em!" He winked and chuckled, then whistled to a newsboy across the street: "Sonny, if you'll bring in a dozen of the fellows to-night. I'll give you a treat."

And he did. "He come down handsome," the boys said, afterward, with

PARTNERS

ice-cream—two kinds; and three doughnuts apiece.

The days of waiting for his appointment went slowly to William Sprague, but they were passing with placid haste to Mrs. Gedge, who by that time had become entirely reconciled to her own explanation of Mr. Hunter's ungracious behavior.

CHAPTER V

MAY was very lovely among the hills. The sunshine, threaded by sudden showers, or chased by cloud shadows and warm winds, lay like a smile upon the Purham meadows. The lilac buds opened into green stars, with that faint, indefinable fragrance which the later purple blossoms exaggerate almost into coarseness. The brook was high, and the whirling brown waters shook the wooden bridge in a threatening way; the red buds of the leaning maple dipped into the flood, and strained and tugged at their stems as though trying to be off on its turbulent freedom; all the world was full of joyous life and promise.

One blue, still afternoon Amanda

PARTNERS

Gedge went up to the burying-ground on the hill to brush away the sheltering dead leaves on Willie's grave, and plant a root of lilies of the valley. The sun was warm on the slope, and although it was indiscreet for a person who was over forty and rheumatic, Amanda, after she had performed her little office of love, spread out her shawl and sat down on the grass to meditate. Something must be done about the tintype: The bit of glass that covered it was badly spotted with mildew; she must take it off and clean it, and wipe the tintype very carefully. The thought of holding the picture in her hand after all these years gave her a thrill; and the pleasure of doing even such a little thing for Willie, was a phantom of the pleasure she would have known had she been his wife and been able to serve him. She smoothed the grass where, under the sheltering dead leaves, it had whitened to a silky smoothness, and she

PARTNERS

hoped the lily root would grow. Willie had loved flowers—except toward the end; he had not loved anything at the end. One day when she carried him a bunch of cardinal flowers, he had turned fretfully away and told her not to bother.

“Willie was so sick,” she said to herself, pitifully; but she wondered if sickness could have made her careless of any flowers Willie might have brought her? “No,” she said to herself, “I would have loved them, no matter how sick I was. But I’m a girl; girls are different from men.” She put her arm around the slate stone, and touched his name with her lips. “Good-by, Willie,” she said, softly. Amanda always said good-by to him when she left him alone on the hillside. She knew that Willie was in heaven, but somehow he seemed here, too, under the leaning piece of slate and the bleached winter grass.

When she got back to the post-office, tired, but full of the peace of the calm

PARTNERS

sweet afternoon, her mother had a dozen small happenings to report. Amanda listened to everything with keen interest; and not until all the gossip was repeated and commented upon did she confide her plan about the glass over the tintype. Mrs. Gedge agreed that it was the thing to do, though it would cost money to get that glass out of the lead that held it into the stone.

“You are certainly faithful, ’Mandy!” she said; Amanda smiled. “I guess,” Mrs. Gedge went on, “feeling the way you do, you’ll never marry.” Amanda laughed outright. “But it’s a pity for a girl to be an old maid! Still, I like to have you faithful to your beau. But my gracious, what would you have done if you’d been left like me, if you take on so, and Willie only your beau?” Amanda was silent.

It was too dark to knit, but Mrs. Gedge saw her daughter, who was sorting the mail, put aside an official letter;

PARTNERS

instantly she wanted to know what was in it. "Do make haste!" she said. "My, you ain't real quick, 'Mandy. I wonder if they are going to change the stamps! They're not pretty—the stamps."

Amanda looked over her shoulder to say, "H-s-sh;"—the Public must not overhear an official criticism! But she took time to give her mother the letter, for though Mrs. Gedge could not read it in the fading light by the window, and Amanda had the lamp to assist her in sorting the mail, it was a satisfaction to the old postmistress to hold it in her crippled hands. As soon as her public duties had been discharged, Amanda opened the envelope.

"I can't stop to talk," she said, with her official smile, to two or three women who were waiting to gossip with her at the delivery window, "because I must attend to some Washington business;" and, properly impressed, the ladies could only talk to each other.

PARTNERS

"Read it, child, read it!" said her mother, impatiently.

Amanda read:

MADAM,—It is deemed for the best interests of the service that a change be made in the post-office at Purham. Your resignation will, therefore, be accepted, to take effect on the 1st day of June. Yours truly, ———

The name that followed Amanda did not know.

"Why, I don't understand," said Mrs. Gedge. "What does it mean?"

Amanda stared at her; then grew a little faint, and sat down.

"But I don't understand," her mother repeated, in a dazed way.

"Don't!—they'll hear," Amanda whispered.

"*Mandy?*" the terrified old voice whispered back.

Without a word, Amanda wrapped her shawl about the little, shrinking figure, and opened the door into the hall.

"I'm going to wheel mother into the

PARTNERS

sitting-room," she called to the women who were standing by the counter.

Her voice was husky, and there was a swift precision in her manner, which they noticed and commented on. They said they supposed that Amanda Gedge was getting real worried about the old lady, and no wonder, either. They waited a good while, hoping that she would return; but as she didn't, they said it was lucky they were there, for Mrs. Dace came hurrying in to buy a stamp, and there was a good deal of giggling about "being the post-mistress," for, rather than bother 'Mandy, they went behind the pigeon-holes themselves, and in the most obliging way in the world, opened the stamp-box and received Mrs. Dace's two pennies just as well as 'Mandy herself could have done. Then, laughing, they went off into the twilight, leaving the old post-office in dusky quiet, its door standing hospitably open.

PARTNERS

It was nine o'clock before Amanda Gedge came back. She closed the door, turned the lamp down low, and dropped into a chair. With her face hidden in her hands, she went all over the last three hours: her mother's bewilderment and terror; the shock to her pride, a pride which seemed, Amanda had thought, watching the old face wither and whiten—to be her life; then the struggle to find an explanation, and at last the rally of courage when Mrs. Gedge cried out suddenly that *she* knew what the letter meant! The relief of her own insight was for a moment almost too great for words. "The best interests of the service," she said, with a gasp; "for *our* interests, 'Mandy; don't you see? It is just consideration! They think I'm too old for such hard work. That's it, I know it is. It's kindness. But, 'Mandy, child, you go right in to the office, and write to the President; it's no use wasting time on the help—

PARTNERS

go to the highest-up person—go to the President of the United States! You write to him; tell him I am not too old to work for the Government; of course that's what they think—you can see that from the letter; they think I'm too old, and they give me the chance to resign. Well, you say I am obliged, but it isn't necessary. You see, they think the work is too much for me. Oh, don't let the President think I don't appreciate it, but tell him to tell the Postmaster it isn't necessary; tell him I could not think of giving up my job. Why, I couldn't desert the Government after these twenty years! And explain to him how much you are able to do now you are older. Tell him I call you my "partner"—just as a joke. Write *pleasant*, 'Mandy. You know you were young when I got the place, and they have forgotten that you are older now." She looked up at her daughter, and actually laughed with

PARTNERS

relief. "My! it did give me a start! But you see what it means?"

"Oh, yes," Amanda assured her; "why, of course." Her whole body was quivering, but she managed to keep her voice steady; the childishness of the explanation was a shock to her; but she could not stop to realize its full significance. "We won't resign," she was saying to herself; "that's all there is to it; we *won't!*" Aloud, she said courageously: "It's all right, don't you worry!"

"'Course I won't worry," Mrs. Gedge retorted; "there's nothing to worry about! You write that letter just as I told you."

"Yes, mother, soon as I get you to bed," Amanda promised.

But now alone in the dark office she faced the facts:

"They will 'accept' mother's resignation. We have got to get out. But we won't! It's Mr. Hamilton did it, Oh,

PARTNERS

that man! Well, we won't resign. I'll write and tell them so, and very likely we'll never hear anything more about it. But at any rate, *we won't resign.*" She would never forgive Mr. Hamilton, she was sure of that. The blow to her mother—Amanda's shoulders shook as she sat there, her head on her knees, swaying to and fro with misery—the shock to Mrs. Gedge was too great to be forgiven. "Oh, if I only hadn't lost his letter! It's my fault; it's all my fault; I'm to blame, not mother—"

After a while she sat up, drawing a long, quivering breath; she must not waste any more time; she must write the letter explaining that Mrs. Gedge was much obliged, but did not care to avail herself of the kindness of the Government, and therefore would not resign. This was the letter to the President, for Mrs. Gedge to sign. Then, on a sheet of thin pink paper, with a print of a rose in the upper left-hand corner,

PARTNERS

came the real letter—Amanda's self-accusation. She wrote with passionate haste, unlike her usual labored correspondence with the department. "Oh," she was saying to herself, "even if they did mean it kindly, as mother thinks, it may kill her. But they *didn't* mean it kindly—they want to put us out! Oh, that Hamilton man—"

When, at last, the letter written, she took up her lamp, she suddenly remembered the flag. She had not lowered the flag! Never, in all these years, had she forgotten the flag for which her father and her lover had died! As she stood in the darkness, letting the halyards slip through her fingers until the stars and stripes came softly down into her extended arms, Amanda felt the full agony of loss—they would take the flag away from her!

Mrs. Gedge's prim refusal to accept the suggestion made by the department, and Amanda's poor, passionate letter,

PARTNERS

went off the next morning. As days passed without any answering communication from Washington, Amanda grew calmer than she had thought she could be while this cruel uncertainty was hanging over her. As for Mrs. Gedge, she began to gather an immense amount of comfort and pride from what she chose to regard as an expression of Governmental consideration. She told Amanda that she really wished the Public knew of it. She didn't want to be proud, she said, but it was gratifying, and she almost wished Sally Goodrich knew it. The innocent importance cut Amanda to the heart. "Oh, she ain't herself," she thought, quaking. Aloud, she only said it wouldn't do to tell folks about it. "Maybe you're right," Mrs. Gedge said, reluctantly; "we're not like ordinary people; we can't tell our affairs."

Although the refusal to resign had apparently been accepted in Washington without a protest—for no response

PARTNERS

was made to the two letters—Amanda found herself counting the days until the 1st of June. She did not know why. She only felt that something was going to happen then. But those soft spring days brightened Mrs. Gedge wonderfully—the weather, and the quiet of her mind, for, not hearing from the President, the shock of the letter she had at first so grievously misunderstood, faded entirely from her memory. Her forgetfulness gave poor Amanda another pang.

The second week in May Mrs. Gedge said that, although she felt better, she believed she would not go into the office for a few days; the being wheeled over made her bones ache, and she'd just as lief stay in the sitting-room, she said. But from her window she could still watch the world; and one day, when the stage came rumbling up at noon, she saw a man on the box-seat at Olly's side, who roused her curiosity. When

PARTNERS

her daughter came in to get dinner, she spoke of him.

"He was real pleasant-looking," she said, as Amanda pushed her chair up to the table; "real pleasant, but big; though he ain't to blame for that. Who do you think he can be? He had a little dog sitting up beside him, like a little deacon! I like to see a man friendly with a dog. He isn't the sewing-machine man; maybe he's a dentist?"

"Or a book agent," suggested Amanda. "I like book agents, they have so much conversation. Sometimes I think, if I'd the money, I'd buy one of their books, they do talk so nice about 'em."

"He looked up at the flag, and waved his hand. I guess he's been a soldier," Mrs. Gedge commented.

"Guess likely," Amanda agreed.

"When Mr. Thyme comes in, child, you be sure and ask who he is. It's too early for a summer boarder."

It was delightful to have a new

PARTNERS

topic of conversation. William Sprague, "cleaning himself" before a small mirror in the office at the tavern, had no idea how much pleasure his advent had given. William's coming to Purham thus early was simply because his important happiness demanded some kind of action. The day that Mrs. Gedge had been notified that her resignation would be accepted, a communication had come to William Sprague, showing the reverse side of that notification. He read his Washington letter a dozen times a day for sheer pleasure; and each day the 1st of June seemed farther off! He packed his trunk at once, and when he had had a week of inconvenience in unpacking and repacking whenever he wanted anything, it occurred to him that the best thing he could do would be to take Jimmy and go to Purham, and while waiting for the 1st of June, become acquainted with the place and the people.

PARTNERS

"It's two weeks before I go into office," he told his friends, "but I'll be learning the ropes, and get a good grip on my job."

He was as full of enthusiasm and of plans for reform in what he knew nothing about, as was Mr. Hamilton himself. He took it for granted, after the manner of all new brooms, that everything in Purham was in the most shocking condition of neglect and dilapidation. Yes, the sooner he got there and looked about him, and investigated the poor, feeble, inefficient post-office, the better! So, one fine morning, with only the delay of carting his trunk to the station, William Sprague hurried off to his kingdom; in the afternoon, on the box-seat beside Olly Clough, with Jimmy between his knees, he went swinging and creaking along the hilly roads toward Purham.

He did not tell Olly who he was; he preferred the sensation of coming into

PARTNERS

his kingdom in disguise. But he was very gracious; he complimented the country that stretched before him, in terms which intimated a willingness to overlook any mistakes on the part of the Creator; he thought the houses seemed comfortable, and he said that the barns were quite a size; he admitted that it had apparently rained considerable, but he felt that it did good, a big rain; it made him stiff in his joints, but it did good, and he wasn't one to complain. By and by he approached the subject of Purham.

"Pretty place?"

Olly looked vacant. "I ain't thought about its being purty."

"Large population?" Mr. Sprague inquired.

"Sizable."

William Sprague cleared his throat and seemed much interested in the off leader. "Good mare that? Yes? Ha—hum; the post-office, now"—this with

PARTNERS

striking indifference—"quite a job to run it?"

Olly endeavored to conceal his pride. "She's fair," he conceded, "fair. You don't see none better 'an her in the city."

William said city horses weren't in the mare's class; then he tried to woo Olly back to the post-office: "Needs brains to run an office?" The stage-driver was plainly not interested.

"Never heard any complaint of 'Mandy," he said.

"'Mandy?"

"She and her mother run it; been there since the war."

"Well!" said William, much interested. "What are they goin' to do?"

"Do?" said Olly, puzzled.

"When the change is made. The other party is in now, and their men are gettin' the jobs."

Olly's chuckle came as though jolted out of him. "Well, I guess nobody

PARTNERS

won't get old Mis' Gedge's job in our post-office!" He paused to silently wave his whip at the green expanse of the valley below them. Olly thought it was good farming land himself, but the summer visitors made a fuss about the "view," as they called it, so he always pointed it out to any passenger on the box-seat.

"Pretty fair, pretty fair," said William, absently watching a cloud shadow chase across the meadows.

They rumbled along for nearly a mile without a word, the new postmaster feeling vaguely uncomfortable; then Olly broke out:

"Why, look a' here. They ain't got a cent, 'Mandy and her mother. If they weren't in the office, they'd be on the town. Talk about puttin' people in over 'Mandy and the old lady! I guess they'd wish they wasn't put in. I guess they'd be considerable put out!" Olly laughed at this joke several times

PARTNERS

during the next hour. "Put in, put out," he repeated, chuckling.

His passenger frowned silently. "There!" he was saying to himself, "I am sorry for the women; but it ain't for me to say anything. I'll do my duty, that's all I'm here for. The women ain't my business. But it's queer they haven't told this young man about the change. I should think they'd tell him, sure, seein' he carries the mail."

He had no inclination now to disclose his identity to Olly; he was distinctly depressed. "I don't want no ill-will among the people," he thought.

When they turned into Main Street and drew up at the post-office, he glanced about curiously while Olly carried in the mail; then, looking up, he saluted the flag hanging limp in the warm stillness. "I like folks to be patriotic," he said, in a loud whisper. He had decided not to call at the office

PARTNERS

until he had gone to the tavern and cleaned up. That done, however, and a comfortable dinner disposed of, he put on his broad-brimmed felt hat and went with a roll and a limp and Jimmy close at his heels, down to the office.

It was three o'clock, and Main Street was quite deserted; the door of the post-office was partly open, and William saw a tall, angular woman standing behind the counter trying to fit one of pasteboard boxes into its niche on the shelf without wrenching its feeble joints. At his step she turned with a pleased look. "He hasn't a bag, only a dog," Amanda said to herself; "what can he be? Veter'nary, maybe."

"Good afternoon," said the caller, taking off his hat, then putting it on his head again. "How do you do, ma'am?"

"Good afternoon," returned Amanda. "Fine day, sir."

"Well, yes, it is; it is," William agreed.

PARTNERS

"Are you stopping in town, sir?" the postmistress asked. She was not surprised that the stranger had called at the office; except the church, it was the most important place in Purham. Amanda was always gracious, if a little formal, to people who came to pay their respects. She patted Jimmy's head as he stood on his hind legs and sniffed at the counter. The little dog's patient brown eyes made her think of Ponto.

"Well, yes," said William, blankly; "I am. Yes, I—I—"

"On business, I presume. What is your line?" said Amanda, wishing to be agreeable; "dentistry?"

"Well, no," said the caller, frowning very much; "no, I can't say I am a dentist, exactly; no. I came down to call, ma'am, on you. You are Mrs. Gedge, I presume. I understand you run this office?"

Amanda Gedge's heart stood still.

PARTNERS

"The post-office belongs to mother," she said, faintly.

"Yes, just so; so I understood," said William Sprague. "Well, perhaps you weren't looking for me before the first of the month, but I thought I'd come. I thought I'd get to know the place, ma'am."

William sighed with embarrassment, and wiped his forehead. He wished he had a bit of stick and his knife, then he would not have to look at her. The slow whitening of her face, the tremor of her lips as she tried to speak, her hands clutching the edge of the counter until the knuckles were white, were all terrible to him. It was like seeing some dumb creature tortured.

"I don't know—what you mean," she said, in a whisper.

"Well, I'm the new postmaster, you know," William said, bending down to pull Jimmy's ears so that he need not see her face; "and I came to Purham

PARTNERS

a little ahead of time so as I could—maybe you'd—I've no experience and I thought—" He stammered with pity; her rigid face, and wide, terror-stricken brown eyes were too much for him. "I hope you are well, and your ma, too," he ended, weakly.

"You will kill mother," said Amanda.

"Ma'am?"

"You will kill her if you turn her out of her post-office."

William Sprague shuffled his feet noisily on the floor; then took off his hat and seemed to scan it critically. "I ain't responsible, Miss Gedge; I was sent here. The department decided to make a change, I suppose, and I was sent here. I didn't ask for the place."

"You must go away," Amanda said.

William's eyes glistened. "This is the cussedest business I was ever in," he said, under his breath. "Poor girl! Poor thing!" He felt something roll down his cheek, and that helped him

PARTNERS

to be angry. "Well," he said, sternly, "this ain't your affair, nor mine. I'm sent. I can't help it. I'm to be in on the first day of June. I'll go away *till* then. I'd just as lief as not clear out till the first, if it will oblige you any; honest, I would."

"You don't understand," Amanda explained, breathlessly. "You mustn't come back—ever. Mother's been here twenty years. If she was put out, she would die. She would be on the town; but the worst thing to her, the thing that would kill her, would be to be put out. Oh, go away! You can come back when she dies. It won't be—very long. Oh, go—*go!*" Amanda swayed a little and sank forward over the counter, hiding her face in her outstretched arms. She sobbed aloud.

Again William wiped his brow.

Amanda lifted her large face, quivering with tears. "Mother's been here twenty years—twenty years!" She held

PARTNERS

out entreating hands to him, as if begging for mercy.

William Sprague stamped across the post-office and back. "Well, ma'am, I'm sorry. I don't mind sayin' I'm sorry. I—I—I'm damned sorry! But I don't see what I can do about it. If I wasn't here, somebody else would be. And—well, I'm put here, and I'm one that stays where I'm put, when it's my duty."

"Mother's done her duty," said Amanda.

"I ain't a-questionin' that, of course," William assured her. "She's all right. But the party has changed. The Democrats are in. Now you and your mother ain't Democrats, so—out you go!"

"What!" cried Amanda, looking at him with sudden hope. "Not Democrats? Good gracious, if *that's* the trouble, we'll be Democrats right off! It doesn't make a mite of difference to us.

PARTNERS

We'd just as lief be Democrats. So you can go away right off!"

"My Lord!" said William Sprague, despairingly.

"If they had only told us," said Amanda, "we'd have changed in November."

"Well, ma'am," the visitor said, sighing, "I guess I'll go up to the hotel and rest a bit; maybe we can talk it over later in the evening. I'll come in after supper, and talk it over with you and your mother." William was actually fatigued with the hopelessness of the situation.

"No, we can't talk before her," Amanda said. "She mustn't know anything about it. After the mail's in, I'll walk down to the bridge, and if you'll be there, I'll explain why we can't leave the office, and you'll understand, and go away."

CHAPTER VI

THE meeting at the bridge was productive of nothing but another talk; after which William decided that his offer to leave Purham until the 1st of June was unwise. "I've got to stay and face the music," he told himself, grimly. The "music" was Amanda's protesting despair, and his way of facing it was to urge her to be "reasonable." "There's no way out of it," William told her, sympathetically. "You can't buck the United States Government!" He made this so clear to the Public, that in a very short time Mrs. Gedge was the only person in Purham who did not understand the situation; but everybody united with her daughter in concealing it from her.

PARTNERS

Mr. Sprague was so sympathetic, in spite of his determination to "have the place" that he was not very much disliked. He made everybody understand that he was the unwilling tool of circumstances; he could not help himself. "For," as he explained a dozen times a day, "if I didn't come, somebody else would, and it would be just as bad on 'Mandy.'" (He had adopted the customs of the village at once, and called everybody by their first names.)

A week of protest and insistence slipped by; to Amanda it was a long daze of terror; to the new postmaster it was pitiful but inevitable. He was as kind as possible to Amanda; one day he presented her with a little blue glass dish, in the shape of a shell, and the next he gathered a bunch of wild flowers—London-pride and dog-tooth violets and Quaker-ladies, handing them in to her through the delivery window. Amanda accepted them listlessly. She explained

PARTNERS

to her mother that the gentleman who was stopping up at the tavern—"that big red man you saw on the stage, who comes to the office 'most every day with his dog"—he had given her the flowers, she said.

With this new interest Mrs. Gedge revived like some poor, faded flower, that looks up for a moment in the rain. "Why, child," she said, "you've got a beau! I think you might ask him in some time, 'Mandy, to see me."

William Sprague made the same suggestion. "I'd like to see your ma, 'Mandy; 'course, I won't say a word to her, but I'd just like to see how the land lays."

So Amanda had no choice but to arrange a meeting. "Will you come in this afternoon?" she said, dully.

"You bet I will!" said William.

Mrs. Gedge, when she heard that he was coming, was filled with excited hospitality. "Now 'Mandy, you just

PARTNERS

get to work and dust up. Now, come, child, be spry! He'll be here before you know it. Dear! if I only had my legs!" She sighed, for Amanda, duster in hand, moved slowly about in heavy silence. "That's the way with girls now-a-days!" Mrs. Gedge thought, impatiently; "they take their beaux for granted, and won't make a mite of effort for 'em! Wa'n't so when I was young. But 'Mandy is getting on; she'd *ought* to take pains!" The faded place in the carpet near the south window gave her a momentary pang—"but there!" she said to herself; "if 'Mandy takes him, I guess he can buy her a new carpet one of these days." An hour before the visitor was due to arrive, Mrs. Gedge put on her best cap, shook out the folds of a clean handkerchief, and drew Amanda's blue plaid shawl about her shoulders. Suddenly a thought struck her. "'Mandy, I believe those black mitts of mine are in that old cigar box in the right-hand

PARTNERS

corner, back, of my top drawer. Do look, 'Mandy. There, child, hurry! My, you ain't fast."

Amanda found the little black silk mitts, and pulled them gently on to the crippled hands; then she placed her mother's chair on the most faded spot in the carpet, and sat down to await the caller.

William Sprague found the old crippled postmistress sitting up very straight, her mitted hands crossed in front of her.

She gave him a keen look: "If he has means," she said to herself, "he looks like he'd make a girl a good husband;—if 'Mandy will only set up and be pleasant!" She made a little gesture of impatience, for it was plain that 'Mandy had no intention of "setting up." Mrs. Gedge, herself, was very pleasant. She was formal, but that was only at first: Was Mr. Sprague staying long in Purham? Well, yes; Mr. Sprague thought he'd probably settle in Purham.

PARTNERS

("He's not in business," Mrs. Gedge thought, with elation, "so, if he's going to settle here, he must have means!") Aloud, she observed that Purham was a "pretty place."

"Well, 'tis so," William agreed; and asked how long Mrs. Gedge had lived here.

"Always," Mrs. Gedge said; "and pretty nigh always in the Post-office, too. I have had the office more than twenty years. I call my daughter 'Mandy my 'partner' sometimes."

William murmured something to the effect that Miss Gedge was pretty smart, housekeeping, and running a post-office, too.

Amanda, standing with a stony face behind her mother's chair, looked at him as he said "post-office," her eyes filling with terror; he nodded, reassuringly. Mrs. Gedge did not notice their glances; she had her own business to attend to:

PARTNERS

"Praise to the face," she said, smiling and nodding, "Praise to the face is open disgrace; but I must say the child *is* smart. She's a capable girl, sir, and a good housekeeper. The man that gets Amanda," she added, significantly, "will be sure of a meal of victuals any hour of the day." Mr. Sprague did not take up the subject of housekeeping: he said that he should think Mrs. Gedge would be about tired of the office; "you've been here so long," he ended, pleading.

Mrs. Gedge had her reasons for being agreeable, but she could not allow any talk like that; her voice was distinctly less friendly: "In my position I can't think of myself. We are glad, 'Mandy and me, to be in the service, and would never think of being tired." Then she returned to the affair she had in hand; "Besides, as I say, 'Mandy's capable. She takes a good deal off me."

"But you've been here a good while," William persisted. He was not making

PARTNERS

the point he had hoped to; he looked about the room in an embarrassed way and wished he had not come.

"Yes; 'Mandy was only twenty-five when we got the office," Mrs. Gedge admitted, "and that was a good bit ago, but she's kept her looks. There, child, you needn't poke me. I guess your mother can say that! You've been a real good girl, 'Mandy, too. Well, now, sir, how do you like Purham?"

William found this much more comfortable ground, even though Mrs. Gedge, in the most delicate way in the world, said that she understood he was a widower, and, of course, it was lonely for him in a strange place like Purham. "You ought to get married. A man of your years needs a good housekeeper to look after him," she said, emphatically. When he rose to go, she said she hoped he'd come often to see her and 'Mandy. "Of course, in our position we haven't much time; but I'm sure

PARTNERS

I'll be glad to do anything I can for you," she ended, with friendly patronage;—"and I guess you and 'Mandy can find something to talk about—ain't that so, 'Mandy?" Mrs. Gedge was quite arch.

"Yes," said Amanda, faintly.

Her mother made a little impatient cluck between her teeth; it was real silly for Amanda to be so shy! She hadn't said a word since the man had been here; Mrs. Gedge didn't know what girls were coming to nowadays—never making a mite of effort to be agreeable! Mrs. Gedge herself had certainly been agreeable; but her visitor went away with a very sober face.

It was only a few days now until the change must be made. Amanda had altered so that Mrs. Gedge would have been alarmed but for this interest of a beau. Not that she named Mr. Sprague thus to Amanda; she asked every conceivable question about him, but she

PARTNERS

nursed her hope in silence, with small chuckles when she was alone, and with knowing looks and nods when the neighbors came in to gossip. She was too interested in this very personal happiness to notice any constraint in the talk of Sally Goodrich or Mrs. Dace or any one else; but there was constraint, for all the village was intent on shielding her as long as possible from the dreadful knowledge that threatened her.

There was nothing to hope for now; Amanda had "bucked the Government," in vain. Her frantic appeal to the department had finally been answered by a brief statement of her mother's inefficiency. Once, before the answer came, she lay awake all night to plan a journey to Washington: she could take Mrs. Gedge's one hundred dollars out of the bank, and go. For a moment, the impossibility of making any explanation to her mother of so tremendous an undertaking, balked her; then feverishly, she

PARTNERS

put the explanation aside to think out details: she would go to Washington, and see the President—but the very next day came that brief communication from the Post-office Department.

William Sprague, stolidly, but with the kindest pity in his twinkling eyes, assured her that there was nothing more to do;—“except get a move on,” he said, sighing. He was really very much upset about it all. “Darn that cuss, Hamilton, puttin’ me in such a box,” he said to himself more than once. Amanda felt no resentment toward him; she believed him implicitly when he told her it was not his fault—he could not help it; he had been sent.

The first of June was on Monday; on the preceding Thursday, Amanda, her face set in haggard silence, went up to the graveyard. She had decided to break the news to her mother the next morning; but first she would go and sit by Willie for a while, not only for

PARTNERS

the comfort of it, but to be by herself so that she could plan what she should do when their salary ceased. William Sprague had told her that her mother must apply for a pension; but he had admitted that it would take time to secure it. And meantime—well; there was the hundred dollars in the bank, from which Mrs. Gedge received three dollars and fifty cents a year. That was all. They owned their house, but it was of no value save as a shelter. No one would buy or rent it. Everybody in Purham had a house of his own—everybody except Mr. Sprague, and he had at once announced that he was going to live in the tavern, that being cheaper, and more comfortable than housekeeping, for a single man. Amanda could sew, but who would give her work? All the women in Purham did their own sewing, except when Mrs. Dace helped them with the rare occurrence of a new dress. She could go up to the tavern and assist

PARTNERS

Mrs. Thyme in the summer; but at two dollars a week for twelve weeks—Mrs. Thyme's summer boarders rarely stayed longer than twelve weeks—she could only earn twenty-four dollars.

Amanda thought this all out, sitting there on the grass by Willie, her elbows on her knees, her eyes staring blankly at a mullein-stalk swaying in the wind. "Oh, I wish mother might die before she knew it," this old daughter said from her aching heart. She saw no other way to save the heartbreak, the pride that must be trampled down, the violent breaking of all the habits of life—the misery of transplanted age! Amanda had no more tears, but she drew in her breath in a sort of moan. She thought suddenly of those days of anxiety about the album. How could she have been worried over so little a thing! How gladly would she exchange this new despair for that old pain

"'Mandy!" some one shouted from

PARTNERS

the road. It was William Sprague; he was pushing the sagging gate back across the grass and coming into the cemetery. "I want to speak to you, 'Mandy,'" he said, in his loud, cheerful voice. "Your mother said she believed you was up here. If you don't mind, I'll talk to you a bit." He had reached her by this time, and stood watching her with friendly concern. Jimmy came and sniffed her hand, then licked it with his little rough tongue. Amanda did not notice him, and William shook his head. "Why," he thought, "she don't see Jimmy! She must be awful cut up not to see Jimmy.

"'Mandy,'" he said, "I've thought of something. It isn't perhaps just the thing you'd like, but it's the only way out of the darned mess. And I'm will-in'. Well, I—I'd really like it, 'Mandy.'"

Amanda's lips parted; her eyes dilated. "A way out?"

"Get married!" said William.

PARTNERS

Amanda stared at him.

"I mean you and me," William explained. "It's like this: your ma would be pleased, and she'd never know anything. I'd be pleased; I'd have a home, and I'd be comfortable. You'd be pleased, 'cause you wouldn't be worried about money. And I don't mind being married the least bit; honest, I don't. I like you, 'Mandy. It's only fair to say I like you. I told your ma I liked you, and I was comin' up here to tell you so."

"You told mother?" said Amanda, in a whisper.

"You haven't thought that way about me, I know," he apologized, "and of course it's sudden and we'd have to be spry; we'd have to get spliced before Monday. But just look at it, 'Mandy: it's the only way to get ahead of Mr. Hamilton, confound him! I wish I'd let him get that ball that was meant for him. 'Course, we'd never let on to your ma why we did it; she could con-

PARTNERS

sider me a third 'partner,'" he said, winking: "But besides makin' it right for her, it would be agreeable to me. As I say, I think you're a nice girl, I like you. Now, if you can only just make up your mind to me?"

Amanda Gedge put her hand down on the grass as though she were groping for some other hand to help her. "Oh, what shall I do?" she said.

William Sprague sat down beside her, then remembered the imprudence of sitting on the grass in May, and rose. "I thought it all out," he assured her, "and it come to me last night all of a sudden. 'Well, there!' says I to myself, 'weren't 'Mandy and me a couple of fools not to think of that way of settlin' this hash!' What do you say?"

She had nothing to say. She put her hands over her face. "Oh, *Willie!*" she said, under her breath.

"Well, now, there! That's right!" said William, heartily. "My first wife



"I LIKE YOU, 'MANDY'"

PARTNERS

called me Willie, and I like to hear it again. Yes; we'll get along first rate, 'Mandy; me and you and Jimmy and the old lady. Come, now, it's all settled, ain't it?"

She drew a half-sobbing breath before she could speak. "Oh, I *must* save mother! and you are so kind, so very, very kind to think of this way—William."

THE END

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